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Sex, Lies, and Internet: A Case Study of the Starr Report on President Clinton.[1]

by

JEFFREY LAYNE BLEVINS

Jeffrey Layne Blevins (M.S., Southern Illinois University, 1998) is a doctoral student at Ohio University, School of Telecommunications, in Athens, OH. His research interests include political economy and new communications technologies. The author thanks Drs. Drew McDaniel and David Mould at Ohio University, as well as Dr. Patrick Murphy (Southern Illinois University) and Dr. John Weispfenning (Otterbein College, OH) for their helpful comments.

Contact information: Jeffrey Layne Blevins

24 Home St. Apt. # 303

Athens, OH 45701

Phone: (740) 594 - 5215

E-mail: Jeffrey.Blevins.2@ohiou.edu

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Abstract

In the case of the Starr report on President Clinton this exploratory study searches for evidence that the Internet might play a role in participatory democracy. Through in-depth interviews of respondents who sought out the Starr report on-line it appears that viewing the document on the Internet had little impact on political participation. More notably, it is evident that television coverage of the sexually explicit details contained in the report, and the announcement of its Internet debut, were the primary motivations for reading the document. Most importantly, this study contributes to a theoretical framework for analyzing the Internet and political participation, and demonstrates the usefulness of the methodological approach applied in this research.

KEY WORDS: politics, Internet, participatory democracy, political participation.

Introduction

> The oddest mass political act in the history of American democracy began with an electronic storm, a blizzard of attempts to find the Starr report on the Internet.
> (Fisher & Montgomery, 1998, p. A01)

Just hours after independent counsel Kenneth Starr's report on President Clinton was launched into cyberspace on September 11, 1998, a flurry of web users were scouring the Net for a peek at the document. CNN scored 34 million page views of the Starr report, ABCNews.com reported 12 million page views, and many other on-line news services

reported an unprecedented amount of traffic that day (Macavinta, 1998). More importantly than the record numbers, the presence of the Starr report on-line may have helped demonstrate the impact that the Internet can have on American political participation. Citizens were able to bypass the gates of mainstream media (such as television and newspapers) and gain instant access to the report submitted by the Office of Independent Counsel to the United States House of Representatives, which recommended impeachment of the President. The 445 page Starr report was too lengthy to be printed in newspapers, and television reporters could only offer a condensed analysis of it. Through the Internet, however, people were able to have quick and unfiltered access to the entire document.

Many Internet enthusiasts have seen this case as demonstrative of how the Internet can impact national politics by bringing

> more people directly into the political process, enabling them to bypass the inevitable filtering and selecting effect of the media. (*Washington Post*, 1998, p. A18)

Some scholars, however, have a less optimistic view of the Internet's potential to influence politics. Douglas Rivers, a Stanford University political science professor, argues that making information accessible does not mean that people will pay attention to it (Peltz, 1998). Nonetheless, the Starr report is well tailored to test this position, as it

> offers crushing weight of detail, any bit of which, arguably, could affect a voter's perception of the seriousness of the president's actions in the Lewinsky matter. (*Washington Post*, 1998, p. A18)

In the case of the Starr report, this study examines the information seeking habits of web users who obtained access to the document. The primary data used in this analysis

is gathered through in-depth interviews of web users, and is concerned with whether or not respondents gained access to the document, their motivations for seeking it out, and how reading the Starr report may have shaped their feelings about the Clinton matter. This data will help substantiate the level of influence the Internet may have on political participation in democratic societies, such as the United States.

Theoretical Framework & Review of Literature

McQuail (1983) proposed two theories to complement the work of Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's (1956) *Four Theories of the Press*. One of McQuail's theories, "democratic-participant," was formulated "in recognition of new media developments and of increasing criticism of the dominance of the main mass media" (McQuail, 1994, p. 131). Democratic-participant theory echoed the 1947 Hutchins Commission's concern that media alienated citizens from political processes. The Commission felt that all citizens needed to have an "unhindered scope" of information and means to attain it, as well as means to disseminate it. Thus, the main value of democratic-participant theory is placed on communication as a means to involve citizens in the political process, as "the full concept of citizenship presupposes an informed and participant body of citizen" (McQuail, 1996, p. 71).

Due to the suffusion of telephone lines, the Internet can connect individuals from all across America. With instant Internet access stemming from all corners of the United States, it could prove to be a revolutionary force for democratic communication by providing a decentralized public sphere. Whereas mainstream media (television, radio,

newspapers and magazines) only afford citizens the ability to receive mass-mediated messages, the Internet can allow everyone to be mass mediators themselves. In mainstream media such as television, "political attention is as passive spectators watching helplessly on the sidelines" (Erikson & Tedin, 1991, p. 53); that is, watching and reading about political events and activities that have filtered through the media. However, "democracy works best when the people actively attend to public affairs" and help direct public policy "toward the problems most deserving of attention and actively monitor their deliberations" (Erikson & Tedin, 1991, p. 53). With the Internet, everyone could have access to receive and disseminate messages across the continent, and thus, come closer to this possibility. In an information society, democratic-participant mass communication is an important consideration, as

> it will not be possible to achieve the goals of citizenship in the absence of information and communication systems which provide the information base and the opportunities for access and participation for all citizens. (Halloran, 1997, p. 47)

One way of achieving such an "unrestricted flow of information," the Hutchins Commission predicted, would be through new communication technologies (McIntyre, 1987, p. 141).

Fifty years later, that prediction may possibly be realized with the development of the Internet. For those that may feel alienated from the political process, Buie (1996) has charged that the Internet has the capacity for

> generating new political energy by encouraging and rewarding participation. Average citizens--no longer politically isolated, no longer sitting passively in front of their TV sets--are networking around the world, and intensely debating the news of the day. (Buie, 1996)

Buie (1996) predicted that once people understood the "ease of political activism on the Net, citizen participation will surely grow by leaps and bounds." In some cases, this seems to be coming true, as the Internet has already been used as a tool in increasing campaign venues and grassroots lobbying (Bonner, 1998). *Campaigns & Elections* (1998) magazine has reported that during this election year 63% of the candidates utilized the Internet in their campaign strategies (p. 1). In 1996 the Georgia Tech Research Institute had already shown that over nine out of 10 web users were also registered voters (p. 1).

McChesney (1996) agrees that communication is "meaningful to participatory democracy," and that mainstream media have not contributed to the "groundwork for an informed citizenry" (p. 11). However, McChesney has also been more skeptical that new technology will make any meaningful difference, predicting that the Internet will be utilized mainly for commercial enterprise, rather than political emancipation. McChesney (1996) posits that

> Given the dominant patterns of global capitalism, it is far more likely that the Internet and the new technologies will adapt themselves to the existing political structure rather than create a new one. Thus, it seems a great stretch to think the Internet will politicize people; it may just as well keep them depoliticized. (p. 14)

Grossman (1998) also argues that there has been "enormous hype and exaggerated optimism" over the Internet, explaining that when radio and television technology was first developed, these media were seen as a potential positive influence on political participation. Since their development, however, Grossman he maintains that these media

have actually influenced the decline in voter turnout and low public interest in politics and public affairs.

Gans (1993) has also explicated several ways in which television has diminished citizen involvement with politics. Not only does television devote little time to public affairs programming, shows like *20/20* and *Dateline* offer maximum glitz, but little enlightenment. Moreover, television journalists tend to flock around political 'scandals,' rather than substantive 'issues' (such as health care reform, environmental issues, and civil rights).

In the 1996 U.S. presidential election, less than half of the nation's registered voters bothered to show-up at the polls (Schmitt, 1996, p. B6). Perhaps, this could be attributed to (at least in part) the cynicism of television public affairs programs and barrage of negative attack-ads during campaigns (Gans, 1993). As Jhally (1995) has pointed out, the "fact that large numbers of people are changing their minds on who to vote for after seeing a thirty-second television commercial says a great deal about the nature of the political culture" (p.82). Thus, despite the negative impact that television media may have on citizen participation in politics, its importance can hardly be overlooked.

Recent research has begun to look at the role the Internet may play in involving citizens in politics. During the '96 presidential election campaign, for instance, Warnick (1998) found that parodic political sites "attracted audiences by appealing to well recognized public cynicism about politics, and they did nothing to decrease it" (p. 321). Warnick (1998) found that parodic sites only "provided the illusion of political

participation" through bogus petitions and pseudo polls (p. 306). She concluded that although the Internet has the potential to increase public access to a broad range of political information, it is not effective unless it results in better decision making (Warnick, 1998, p. 321).

Although many scholars agree that the Internet has *potential* to facilitate more citizen participation in politics, there is little consensus on whether this possibility has ever been *realized*, especially in the sense of better decision making. It is quite evident from the sheer numbers that many people viewed the Starr report on the Internet, but little is known about how reading the report may have influenced people's perception of whether or not President Clinton should be impeached; or whether seeing the report decreased public cynicism about the matter, or increased it. This research goes beyond the raw number of people who saw the document on-line, and looks for how it may have facilitated more public participation in politics, and if so, to what extent. Knowing this possibility could certainly enhance future use of the Internet in a more democratic-participant manner.

Research Methodology

Design

A case study design is well suited for this research frame, as case studies tend to focus on a single contemporary event, and strive to uncover new insight about it (Yin, 1989). Case studies are particularly useful when "the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident" (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). This

research is interested in how the Internet has been realized as a facilitator of public participation in political matters, particularly in the case of the Clinton impeachment investigation. For this case study, the researcher is not concerned with the "effects" of the Starr report being made available on-line (such as page views of web sites which carried the document). Rather, the researcher seeks to learn what the presence of the Starr report on-line meant to people who viewed it, and how they used its information in decision making on the Clinton matter. Although, there may be clear evidence of many people accessed the document, there is little testimony as to how those people used the information in the report. In order to explore this question, the researcher sought out first-hand accounts of the experiences of individuals who viewed the document.

The Researcher's Role

Considering that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection in this investigation, it is essential that the investigator's perceptions of the case being studied are located, as they may shape the interpretation of the interview data. In qualitative research, though, this is seen as a valuable insight, rather than a detriment (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1987). The researcher's observations are especially useful in this case, considering the convoluted nature of the Clinton impeachment controversy, and how mainstream media have covered the story.

The investigator began to pay attention to the scandal when it first broke in January of 1998. Stories began to surface on all the nightly newscasts that President Clinton had a sexual affair with Lewinksy, while she was an intern at the White House.

Although, Clinton initially denied the affair in January, on August 17th he finally admitted to having an "inappropriate relationship" with Lewinsky. A month later, the Starr report was released, which charged the President with perjury, while recounting the salacious details of his sexual encounters with Lewinsky. Leading up to the mid-term elections in November, it seems that public sentiment on whether or not Clinton should be impeached for lying about the matter has been split heavily between party lines. Overwhelmingly, 86% of Republicans who voted in the election favor impeachment, while 69% of Democrats who voted oppose impeachment (*USA Today*, 1998, 17A). Considering that Democratic gains were made in the Congressional election, it appeared that a majority of Americans wished that the Lewinsky matter had been dropped without any impeachment hearings (Page & Koch, 1998, 3A).

Contrarily, the researcher has observed that the major American news networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox News) have devoted a tremendous amount of coverage to the scandal. National and local newscasts, as well as talk shows, have produced a barrage of idle banter on the subject. In addition, the large number of people who viewed the Starr report on-line indicates a substantial amount of interest in the matter. One way to account for the disparity between what the exit polls indicate and the amount of media coverage, perhaps, is to assume that the details in the Starr report may have had some impact on people's thinking about the Clinton investigation. I commenced this study with that proposition in mind.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher purposely selected six individuals for in-depth interviews, who fit the following profile: Ohio University undergraduate student, registered voter, who accessed the Starr report on-line. The researcher initially approached a total of 42 people (29 males and 13 females) to interview. Of the males, 15 acknowledged that they had accessed the Starr report on-line, and five were suited to be interviewed. However, only one of the 13 females acknowledged that she had viewed the Starr report on-line, and she was willing to be interviewed. This gap in gender is interesting, as it appears that males were generally more intrigued by the report than females. However, that question is beyond the scope of this research project, although it would be an interesting probe for another study. The six individuals that this study is concerned with are John, a 21 year-old male political science major; Aaron, a 24 year-old male history major; Travis, an 18 year-old male (undecided major); Jen, a 21 year-old female telecommunications major; Nathan, a 21 year-old male theater major; and Jordan, a 21 year-old male telecommunications major.

Two primary reasons underline the decision for selecting these respondents. First, undergraduate college students (who are registered voters) represent present, as well as future political participants (who use the Internet somewhat regularly). Therefore, selecting college students for this study will not only give the researcher evidence on how the on-line Starr report impacted political participation now, it will also give implications for the future. In addition, college students have free and regular access to the Internet through their university, and thus, are more likely to use the Internet for gathering

information. This seems to be a fair assessment to make, considering that universities have been given credit for the large growth of the Internet in recent years, and approximately 92% of U.S. universities now have access (Perry, Perry & Hosack-Curlin, 1998, p. 136). A recent survey conducted by Perry, Perry & Hosack-Curlin (1998) also showed that 84.6% of university students predicted that their Internet usage will increase in the future (p. 140). Their study concluded that "regular Internet use by university students is evident in all age groups with fairly consistent usage across groups" (Perry, Perry & Hosack-Curlin, 1998, p. 140). For the purpose of this study, which is concerned with political participation, it is particularly interesting to isolate college students, who are often cited for their lack of political participation. A recent UCLA study has shown that today's college freshmen have low levels of political interest, "are less likely to discuss politics and have less desire to 'influence the political structure' than their counterparts of previous years" (HERI, 1998, p. 2). However, Professor Alexander W. Astin, director of the study, concluded that "these trends are part of a larger pattern of disengagement of the American people from political and civic life in general" (HERI, 1998, p. 2). Therefore, it is important to see if the Internet can change the trajectory of this inclination, and the case of the Starr report on-line is a relevant one to probe.

Usefulness of Methodology and Findings

Because the number of informants used in this study is relatively small, and considering that the respondents are isolated geographically on one campus, the results from this study are not intended to be interpreted as generalizable to any larger

population. Nonetheless, the methodological approach used here is clearly transferable to other settings that are situated in similar or different contexts. Thus, the object of this analysis is to suggest some of the reasons why people sought out the Starr report and how they used the document in their thinking about the Clinton matter. The aim here is to contribute to a larger theoretical framework of how and why web users may use the Internet as an information gathering tool to assess current political affairs.

Data Recording Procedures

Each in-depth interview was conducted face-to-face with respondents. With permission, the interviews were recorded on audiotape, and later were transcribed by the researcher. The researcher also took hand-written notes to supplement the data. The interviews were loosely structured around the following questions:

1. How much of the Starr report did you read?
2. Did you seek out the report yourself (i.e., search for it on the web), or did someone send it to you (i.e., e-mail attachment)?
3. Did you have any difficulty reading the text?
4. Did you e-mail, or by other means, send the report to anyone else? If so, about how many people?
5. What was your motivation for reading the Starr report? Did you want more information on the Clinton investigation? Were you interested in the details of the affair?
6. How did you feel about the Clinton matter before you read the report? Were

you more likely to favor impeachment, or oppose impeachment?

7. How did you feel about the Clinton matter after you read the report? Were you more likely to favor impeachment, or oppose impeachment? Do you think that reading the report changed your feelings in any way?
8. Have you talked to other people (on-line and off) about what you read in the report?
9. Since reading the report, have you written any letters to the editor of any newspaper to express your opinion on whether or not Clinton should be impeached? Have you circulated, or signed any petitions?
10. Since reading the report, have you contacted a congressman, senator, or any other local official to express your views in support or opposition of impeachment?

Data Analysis Procedures

Working with interview transcriptions of loosely structured data gathered from respondents is always a daunting task (Boulton & Hammersley, 1996, pp. 288-289). Nonetheless, the researcher has carefully reviewed the findings to interpret the patterns and themes that emerged. The findings are reported in a narrative format based on the 10 questions that loosely structured the interviews. The researcher quotes each of the respondents to make comparisons, and note differences in their responses. In addition, the researcher also makes relevant observations along the way.

Findings

1. How much of the Starr report did you read?

Only one of the six respondents reported that they viewed more than five pages of the Starr report, which seems to diminish the unique benefit of having access to all 445 pages of the document. John said that he was "just skimming to see what the actual charges were." Jen said that she "skimmed it pretty much like I would a Harlequin novel" and read "just a few pages . . . just some of the juicy stuff." Nathan reported using "skimming techniques" as well. While "scanning" through the document, four of the respondents mentioned the same passage, about a "cigar," which was reportedly used during one of Clinton and Lewinsky's sexual encounters. Most of the respondents, mentioned right away how shocked they were by the graphic depictions of Clinton and Lewinsky's sexual liaison. Nathan remembered saying to himself, "I can't believe I'm reading all of this."

2. Did you seek out the report yourself (i.e., search for it on the web), or did someone send it to you (i.e., e-mail attachment)?

Four of the respondents reported that they had searched for it themselves on the web, while two others said that someone else had located it for them. John said that he subscribes to the *New York Times* on-line, and that their web site devoted a whole section to coverage of the report, as well as the report itself. Travis located the document on CNN com, while Jen and Nathan remembered finding it on one of the "newspaper web sites." Aaron and Jordan reported that friends of theirs had downloaded the report on

PC's and invited them to view it. Although they did not recall where their friends found the report on the Internet, it seems that the web sites of popular news sources (*New York Times*, CNN, etc.) were instrumental in disseminating the report.

3. Did you have any difficulty reading the text?

None of the respondents said that they had any difficult parsing the text of the lengthy document. John said, "it was pretty straightforward . . . I had read articles about what it [the report] contained and stuff beforehand. So, I kind of knew what I was looking for." Aaron did not feel the text was "too difficult" to discern either. "It wasn't like a novel or anything," Aaron said, "but it wasn't as technical as I thought it would be." Jen had added, "Well . . . there's just some things that sound funny in formal language, like the insertion of a . . . you know." A cigar.

4. Did you e-mail, or by other means, send the report to anyone else? If so, about how many people?

Although Aaron and Jordan reported that someone else had located the document for them, none of the respondents said that they had further disseminated the report. John said, "it wasn't recommended reading," considering the graphic nature of the text.

5. What was your motivation for reading the Starr report? Did you want more information on the Clinton investigation? Were you interested in the details of the affair?

Every respondent said that they were intrigued by all the television and newspaper publicity that the on-line Starr report received. Travis said that all the news reports made him curious about what was going on. Aaron became curious about the report after hearing several reports about what the document contained, and the fact that it was going to be put on-line. "It was a big event," Aaron said, "you hear all the news reports, and it was interesting to actually read what kind of went on."

In particular, it seems that the television and newspaper coverage of the Starr report's graphic content, is what prompted most of the respondents to look at the document. John said, "I was just looking to see how graphic it got. I was curious how much they probed into that. . . I had read the articles and saw a couple of things on TV. I just couldn't believe it got that graphic." Jen said that she decided to search for it on the Internet after reading "a lot of news and editorials on it . . . The news stories brought out all the, you know, 'details' . . . So, when the actual report came out, I wanted to hear what all the hype was about, and why." For Jordan, "the details about the cigar," were what interested him most. Jordan said that a neighbor friend had called and said, "come over you got to read this," about the cigar. Jordan added that his sister had called earlier and "left a message on my answering machine too, saying, 'my god, I just read this at work on the Internet.' She didn't go into details, but my sister doesn't get that animated about things, so I thought if this is my sister leaving me a message, long-distance, I thought 'what could be so intriguing?'" Nathan was a little more bemused about the coverage, saying that "the comical aspects of it," inspired him. "I had heard, just following it in the

news and when they announced it, how they had an armored car to bring it to the Senate so it could be reviewed before it was released," Nathan said, "it was just ridiculous."

6. How did you feel about the Clinton matter before you read the report? Were you more likely to favor impeachment, or oppose impeachment?

Nearly all of the respondents did not favor impeachment before reading the Starr report on-line. Nathan's response seemed typical of most. "Personally, the only opinion I had about it was the fact that he lied, and granted, he lied under oath," Nathan said, "but, he had an image to protect. I can understand why he lied. I just think if they had kept it under a more closed door situation that he would have admitted to it right away, and it just got blown out of proportion by the media." Aaron was the only one who seemed concerned about the Clinton matter. "I thought it was quite serious," Aaron said. "It's kind of big, to accuse the President of doing something like that -- lying, basically."

7. How did you feel about the Clinton matter after you read the report? Were you more likely to favor impeachment, or oppose impeachment? Do you think that reading the report changed your feelings in any way?

Reading the report did not seem to sway the respondent's feelings on the Clinton investigation. If anything, it might have substantiated the feelings they had about the matter before reading the report. Aaron said, "I think the report made it more real. You hear some of the allegations and then you read things that actually happened. It's more description. It made it more real."

Jen commented, "I came to the conclusion that I would vote for him [Clinton] again . . . I didn't expect a lot of things that I saw, or a lot of things that I heard, but I don't think that anything that Kenneth Starr said really swayed me against Clinton. . . I don't blame him at all for lying to the public at the beginning. I thought that was the only issue I had with him, not that he did it with an intern, but that he lied. But then again, in his position, you know . . . the first time you get asked. I wouldn't have disclosed any information until I was completely pressed, completely backed against the wall. I just think Starr blew it out of proportion too. I think it's his mission to get Clinton out of office, and I just don't think that that is a very good idea. I don't think that he should be impeached."

Nathan replied, "there's maybe 50 pages out of the 600 that will hold up in court as evidence. I just think it was a colossal waste of money and time. Classic big government at work." Nathan added, "I don't think he needs to be impeached. I think the job he's done for the country is fine. The fact that he lied about having an extra-marital affair, just doesn't affect my opinion of him as a leader . . . That was more of a personal matter, than a public matter."

Jordan responded, "it really didn't change my view. I don't think he should be impeached . . . As far as I'm concerned, it's a witch hunt."

8. Have you talked to other people (on-line and off) about what you read in the report?

All but one of the respondents reported that they had talked to a few people about the report, but the conversations were mostly jokes about the explicit details of Clinton and Lewinsky's sexual encounters.

9. Since reading the report, have you written any letters to the editor of any newspaper to express your opinion on whether or not Clinton should be impeached? Have you circulated, or signed any petitions?

Aaron reported that he had signed a petition on a Ross Perot web site favoring impeachment. Jen said she had thought about writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper, but never got around to it. Nathan said he started to write a letter to the President, but never finished it.

10. Since reading the report, have you contacted a congressman, senator, or any other local official to express your views in support or opposition of impeachment?

None of the respondents reported that they had contacted any elected, or public official to express their views about the Clinton investigation.

Conclusions

From the in-depth interviews it appears that viewing the Starr report on-line had a minimal impact on individual's feelings about the Clinton investigation, and did very little to stimulate political participation. This study showed that respondents mostly skimmed the document, and actually read no more than about five pages of the 445 page report.

None of the respondents further disseminated the report by e-mail, or other means. Most of their discussions about what they read in the report with friends, family and colleagues dealt with the explicit details of Clinton and Lewinsky's sexual liaisons. Nearly all of the respondents were opposed to impeaching Clinton before reading the report, and all the respondents held the same view after reading the report as they had before perusing the document. With the exception of Aaron, who signed a petition on a web site, none of the respondents wrote letters to editors of newspapers, or contacted any elected officials to express their views on the Clinton investigation. All of these factors seem to indicate very little political involvement with the Clinton matter.

Perhaps, the most significant finding in this case study is in terms of *why* so many people sought out the Starr report on-line. It is quite notable that all the respondents revealed that they anticipated reading the report because of all the coverage it was getting from mainstream media (television, radio, newspapers, etc.), regarding the specific details of Clinton and Lewinsky's sexual affairs. Why did so many people read the Starr report on the Internet? In the case presented here -- sex, rather than political motivation, seems to be the best explanation for the phenomenon. More often, it was the chance to read about the specific details of Clinton and Lewinsky's sexual behavior which captured their attention, and motivated them to read the document. What does all of this implicate for the future of the Internet and democratic-participant communication? Perhaps, it indicates that it will take more than just the Internet to stimulate political activity. Rather than the Internet having a substantial impact as a medium, by informing and engaging citizens in

political matters, maybe it will merely echo the coverage of sensational events by mainstream media.

At least in this case, the Starr report did not demonstrate the possibility of "democratic-participant" communication; although, different informants in other settings may yield different results. What this study has provided is a unique approach to assess the viability of the Internet in facilitating political participation. The research has demonstrated the usefulness of collecting information from web users, rather than merely relying on the number of "hits" on a web page. Counting the number of page views, or similar techniques, will not offer the depth of information as provided by web users -- such as how and why they use the Internet as an information gathering tool in political affairs. This methodological practice revealed the significance of mainstream media (such as television news) and the sensational circumstances of the whole event, which may have went unobserved in other types of analysis. In the future, when analyzing the role of the Internet in political participation it will be important to also consider the interrelated coverage of other media, and the overall context of particular situations.

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